

To Achieve Equality, First Lady Wants to 'Shake Things Up'

Africa's future lies with women who run businesses, girls who attend university and "leaders like you," U.S. first lady Michelle Obama told young Africans attending the Washington Fellowship for Young African Leaders Summit in Washington.

"Leadership is about creating new traditions that honor the dignity and humanity of every individual. Leadership is about empowering all of our people — men, women, boys and girls — to fulfill every last bit of their God-given potential," she said to the gathering of Africa's future leaders.

"When we commit to that kind of leadership across the globe, that is when we truly start making progress on girls' education. Because that's when families in small villages around the world will demand equal opportunities for their daughters. ... That's when countries will willingly and generously invest in sending their girls to school," she stated.

The first lady noted that girls who are educated earn higher wages, are more likely to stand up to discrimination and abuse, and have healthier children who are more likely to attend school themselves.

She recalled that while neither of her parents had gone to university, "they had the courage and foresight to push me to get the best education I could."

"That's what should drive us all — the hope of raising the next generation to be stronger, smarter and bolder than our generation. ... So many of you are already doing that."

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The first lady called on the men at the summit and others in the YALI Network to tell all the men they know "that a truly strong, powerful man isn't threatened by a strong, powerful woman. Instead, he is challenged by her, he is inspired by her, he is pleased to relate to her as an equal." She implored them "to keep modeling that behavior yourselves by promoting women in your companies, passing laws to empower women in your countries, and holding the same ambitious dreams for your daughters as you do for your sons."

She called on women at the summit and in YALI — some of whom may have disappointed their families by postponing marriage in order to get an education — to help others to do the same.

Obama told the group that when they face obstacles and resistance in their work goals to remember the words of the man for whom their fellowship is now named — the late South African leader Nelson Mandela:

"It always seems impossible until it is done."

Gender Equality Key to Growth

Gender equality is critical to economic growth.

That's the conclusion of the new World Bank report *Voice and Agency: Empowering Women and Girls for Shared Prosperity*.

The bank estimates that not giving women and girls access to education, ignoring sexual violence and condoning adolescent pregnancy are ways of disempowering women and girls and together can cost a country nearly 4 percent of its annual economy.

According to the Council on Foreign Relations, a think tank, experts acknowledge that social norms have a role in limiting women. Yet, "what one group says is a cultural norm is not necessarily what all the groups will say is the social norm," said World Bank President Jim Kim. Further, he said, norms are often used as "a way of justifying very unequal power relations."

The report says the good news is that "social norms can and do change." It says governments and communities can kick-start that change by providing women and girls with life-skills training, sexual and reproductive health education, mentoring, wages equal to what men are paid and wages for traditionally unpaid work like caregiving.

"Removing constraints and unleashing women's full productive potential can yield enormous dividends that help make whole societies more resilient and more prosperous," the report states.

The report says that when women delay marriage past adolescence, they have greater educational achievement and longer life expectancies that benefit their children's health and education.

It also notes that the number of countries that recognize domestic violence as a crime has risen from close to zero in the mid-1970s to 76 today. "In countries with legislation against domestic violence, women's acceptance of wife beating is lower," it states.

It says that when more women are elected to office, "policy-making increasingly reflects the priorities of families and women." And it says that property ownership can enhance women's capacity to make decisions about their lives, increase their social status, amplify their voices about issues of interest in their communities and increase their bargaining power within households.

The report notes that progressive constitutions and legal reforms can support the transformation of social norms. It states that expanding economic opportunities for women "may be one of the most visible and game-changing events in the life of modern households and all communities."

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